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DE RUEHVN #0416/01 1410827  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH (CCY ADC0757F MSI1875-695)  
R 210827Z MAY 07 ZDS  
FM AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1234  
INFO RUCNARF/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L VIENTIANE 000416

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/20/2017  
TAGS: [KN](#) [KNNP](#) [LA](#) [PINR](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [ARF](#)  
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S FAREWELL CALL; HMONG ISSUES; ARF  
DEMARCHE; NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES

REF: A. VIENTIANE 0382  
[B](#). 06 VIENTIANE 1117  
[C](#). 06 VIENTIANE 1141  
[D](#). STATE 64134

Classified By: AMBASSADOR PATRICIA M. HASLACH for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador used the opportunity of a farewell call on one of MFA's more sophisticated Vice Ministers, and the Lao Senior Official for ASEAN and ARF affairs, to present the most recent Department demarche on ARF issues. VFM Bounkeut expressed support for the USG ISM proposals, and joined us in questioning both the Russian "inter-civilization" dialogue proposal and the Indonesian attempt to add "disarmament" to the nonproliferation issue. We recommend the U.S. ARF delegation discuss U.S. positions in detail with VFM Bounkeut in Manila. The Ambassador also raised North Korean refugees, where Bounkeut indicate support for "quiet" handling, and the Hmong in Thailand. On the latter issues, it appeared that Bounkeut has to work within very tight parameters. End summary.

VFM Bounkeut Sangsomsack

[1](#)2. (U) The Ambassador paid a farewell call on Vice Foreign Minister (VFM) Bounkeut Sangsomsack May 11. VFM Bounkeut had served at the Lao UN Mission (1978-82), as Charge in Washington, D.C. (1982-87), and Lao Ambassador to Thailand (1990-98), before becoming Vice Minister in 2001. Bounkeut told the Ambassador three new portfolios had been added to his previous duties of supervising MFA's ASEAN Department and Department of Economic Affairs. Now he also oversees MFA's International Organizations Department as well as MFA's Institute of Foreign Affairs and represents MFA in the border committees set up with all five of Laos' neighbors (China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma). This has kept him extremely busy during the past year.

The Ambassador's Assessment

[1](#)3. (C) The Ambassador highlighted our first Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue, held in Vientiane in October 2006 (ref B), as marking a significant step forward in our bilateral relationship. She noted the two sides have had existing channels to discuss POW/MIA accounting, counter-narcotics cooperation, and programs to clear unexploded ordnance (UXO). The Comprehensive Dialogue now allows a wider set of discussions to include more complicated issues such as human rights and trade. The participation of the USAID regional director from Bangkok was particularly helpful since USAID

helps fund ASEAN economic and technical assistance. It may be possible for USAID to help fund trade implementation. The Ambassador noted the advantage of exchanging views on issues at times other than when problems arise. She expressed hope the next Comprehensive Dialogue might take place in autumn 2007 in the United States.

AI

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14. (C) The Ambassador highlighted the U.S. contribution of close to \$10 million including via the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization to help Laos prepare for a possible avian influenza (AI) pandemic. She applauded the Ministries of Health and Agriculture for their cooperation on this issue. The Ambassador also complimented the Government of Laos (GOL) for its national plan and for its handling of the March AI outbreak among poultry and the first two human AI cases. Bounkeut noted that Laos, with its smaller population, had an easier time managing these situations than some of its neighbors.

North Koreans

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15. (C) The Ambassador expressed special appreciation for the role VFM Bounkeut has played in resolving cases involving North Korean refugees in Laos. Bounkeut assessed that more North Koreans are transiting via Burma to Thailand rather than coming through Laos. Others are traveling by commercial boats on the Mekong River without passing through Lao immigration check points. Since North Koreans do not stand out in appearance, this is difficult to control, he noted. He then pointed out that, Lao is sensitive about its relations with all countries, so "quiet is better" in dealing with these cases.

The Hmong Issue

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16. (C) Bounkeut noted he had been involved with the GOL's Border Committee with Thailand since becoming VFM. So he will be attending the May 17-18 Border Committee in Bangkok which will focus on security issues. He emphasized a) that the two governments had agreed to deal with the Hmong in Thailand, both at the Nongkhai Immigration Detention Center and at the holding camp in Petchabun Province, on a bilateral basis; b) that their return to Laos would be on a voluntary basis; and c) that there had to be screening to ensure the Hmong involved are actually from Laos rather than possibly being from Vietnam or China.

17. (C) Bounkeut noted that he had met Thai MFA Permanent Secretary Virasak Futrakun in Khon Khen, Thailand on May 9 to

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discuss the agreement to resolve the Hmong issue bilaterally. He added that, when UN Resident Representative in Laos Sonam Yangchen Rana had recently asked him to allow UNHCR to play a role in dealing with the Hmong, he emphasized to her that UNHCR should allow the Lao and Thai governments to resolve the issue first bilaterally. Bounkeut emphasized he had also just met with the Thai Ambassador to Laos and stressed the need for any return to be voluntary; otherwise the two governments would wind up in "great difficulty."

18. (C) The Ambassador emphasized that any return to Laos of Lao Hmong in Thailand should be voluntary. However, the group of 155 in the Nongkhai Immigration Detention Center was a special case since the UNHCR had identified them as "persons of concern" and had referred them to the United States, Australia, and the Netherlands for resettlement. Since we have not been able to interview members of the group, we are unsure how many the United States will take. Still, the Ambassador argued, it is important to understand the situation of the group in Nong Khai is different from the majority of Hmong in the Petchabun camp.

19. (C) The Ambassador noted that the majority of Hmong in the

Petchabun camp are likely to be economic migrants or people enticed by traffickers claims about being able to be resettled in the United States. Only a small percentage of this group might qualify for resettlement. Bounkeut complained about companies exploiting the possibility of U.S. resettlement to make a lot of money from these people. The Ambassador reminded him that PRM Assistant Secretary Ellen Sauerbrey, during a Bangkok visit, made clear last August that the United States did not intend any further large resettlement of Lao Hmong to the United States. Of course that did not stop manipulation of the issue by the trafficking companies.

¶10. (C) Instead of trying to bring the 155 from Nong Khai back to Laos, since they all have UNHCR referrals, the Ambassador asked why the GOL and the Thai did not return a group of purely economic migrants from Petchabun. The GOL could set up a pilot project to resettle them, allow international monitoring, and the world could see they are not being mistreated.

¶11. (C) The Ambassador emphasized that our primary focus is to work together to improve the bilateral relationship between the United States and Laos and reminded Bounkeut our diplomatic relations have been uninterrupted for 50 years. It would not have been in our interest to have supported the Hmong insurgency since 1975, and we have not done so. We do not support talk of a separate homeland for the Hmong. American citizens offering armed or material support for the Hmong insurgency are breaking U.S. laws.

¶12. (C) Bounkeut asked how many Hmong the USG planned to accept, apparently referring to Nong Khai as well as potential refugees from the Petchabun camp. The Ambassador said DHS would have to complete its interviews before that is decided. The law is strict, and people referred for resettlement have to meet specific criteria. The Ambassador also mentioned the discussion in the United States about the ongoing review by Congress of a possible material support waiver for the Hmong. She noted that such a waiver should not be seen as impinging on Lao sovereignty.

¶13. (C) The Ambassador noted the return to their families in April of the 21 girls from the group of 26 Hmong children who had been detained since December 2005 as a positive step. However, most have not been reunited with their parents who remain in Petchabun. Bounkeut pointed out that, if the parents choose to return to Laos to be reunited with their daughters, "there is no reason not to treat them well." The Ambassador pointed out that the fate of the 5 boys from the

group remains undetermined. The Ambassador noted reports they were somewhere in northern Laos. Bounkeut promised that the GOL would continue to try to "find" the 5 boys. (Note: as reported ref C, to our knowledge, the five boys have never been moved from Prison Number 4 in Phongsaly City.)

ARF Demarche

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¶14. (C) The Ambassador took advantage of the meeting's timing to deliver the points from Ref D which had arrived that morning. Bounkeut was familiar with the issues and said that the ASEAN side would separately discuss the U.S. proposals before the ARF meeting begins. He opined that the GOL would agree generally with the USG's ISM proposals. Commenting on Russia's draft Minister's Statement on Inter-Civilization Dialogue, Bounkeut noted that there have been "interfaith dialogues, including with the EU, to focus on religious issues, but discussing "civilization" delves deeply into the history of a country and is "too big." He wondered if this is a mis-translation from Russian to English.

¶15. (C) Regarding Indonesian ARF Senior Official Director-General Primo Jaliendo's letter to A/S suggesting that the ISM be retitled "ISM on Nonproliferation and Disarmament" or "ISM on Nonproliferation in All of Its Aspects," Bounkeut said the GOL supports a focus on nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Thus the

Indonesian proposal is too broad; the group should stay focused on nonproliferation particularly of nuclear weapons. He wondered what levels of disarmament Indonesia would want covered, noting that ASEAN had discussed small arms issues (when the Indonesian Government was concerned about the flow of small arms to Aceh). Bounkeut concluded that the GOL will support the continued focus to be nonproliferation, an issue which he called increasingly important with a nuclear North Korea and a nuclear Iran.

Belarus

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¶16. (C) The Ambassador had presented the USG position on the upcoming vote on new members of the UN Human Rights Commission to Vice Foreign Minister Phongsavath Boupouha when they met May 10 (ref A). Learning that VFM Bounkeut now supervises the International Organizations Department, the Ambassador also briefed him on the Belarus-Slovenia-Bosnia competition, and the Embassy delivered the non-paper to VFM Bounkeut for further information. Note: MFA has three Vice Foreign Ministers, and the division of responsibilities among them shifts irregularly.

Comment

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¶17. (C) Bounkeut has been the most supportive of the three Vice Foreign Ministers although his portfolio does not include supervising the Europe/Americas Department. We and other Embassies have asked for and received his support for quiet resolution of cases involving North Korean refugees. With his almost two decades in New York, Washington, D.C., and Bangkok, Bounkeut has a broader world view than many of his colleagues. We are not surprised he was practical about the need for a quiet flow of North Korean refugees, supportive of the U.S. ARF ISM proposals, and understanding that the Russian proposal for "inter-civilization dialogue" and Indonesia's attempt to add disarmament to the nonproliferation issue would be problematic. Still, Bounkeut appears to have very little room to maneuver on the Hmong issues which continue to be of great concern to the international community.

¶18. (C) The Embassy recommends the U.S. ARF delegation in Manila provide VFM Bounkeut its latest thinking in advance of the ARF SOM Meeting. We expect VFM Bounkeut can be helpful in the ASEAN-only pre-meetings in pressing for "friendly" positions on U.S. proposals.

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